

## LEARNING ABOUT RACE AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS: A CRITICAL INCIDENT SURVEY OF FACULTY AND STAFF

Larry G. Martin

### Abstract

The research project utilized a critical incident survey to investigate two research questions regarding employee diversity on a large urban university campus: What types of racial and ethnic issues and concerns exist among the university's faculty and staff? To what extent do members of the campus community perceive that their race and ethnicity related issues and concerns were successfully resolved?" Three general themes emerged from the data: no race or ethnicity related incidents to report; positive incidents embracing diversity; and negative or problematic issues.

### Introduction

Over the last decade, many colleges and universities have initiated a variety of approaches to assist their organizations to become multicultural, e.g., forming a diversity council; adding new courses; hiring racially/ethnically diverse staff; providing racial-reconciliation and diversity-related workshops for administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders (Shireman, 2003). College campuses have thereby experienced tremendous growth in faculty, staff, and students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. For example, the number of full-time faculty members of color increased by 47.7 percent from 1985 to 1995, compared to a gain of 9.9 percent among whites (ACE net, 2003). Still, faculty of color represented only 12.9 percent of full-time faculty in 1995 (ACE net, 2003). Similarly, from the late 1980s to 1996, the number of African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and American Indian students enrolled in college increased by 2.7 percent to an all-time high of nearly 3.6 million (Ace net, 2003).

Increased numbers of people of color on campuses notwithstanding, employment in a racially and ethnically diverse workplace is often a unique experience for both European Americans and People of Color. Individuals from these populations tend to grow up in racially, ethnically, and socio-economically segregated urban communities and attend equally segregated elementary and secondary schools (Martin, 2004). This pre-employment race/ethnic isolation increases the likelihood of race/ethnic diversity related issues and problems in employment settings. Such problems and issues can significantly influence the organizational climate of universities as they attempt to attract and retain greater numbers of people of color among their faculties and staff. As racially and ethnically diverse individuals and groups interact in the workplace, their culturally-informed differences tend to produce problems and issues that must be effectively managed by the organization. However, these types of issues and problems tend to be "double-loop" learning problems that contribute to defensive routines in organizations (Argyris, 1964). They are thereby very difficult to detect and resolve.

### Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the research was to investigate the extent to which a large (i.e., 26,000 students) urban university located in the Midwest U.S.A. has provided an accepting and accommodating environment for individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds; and to identify the race and ethnic diversity-related issues and concerns that currently exist among faculty, academic staff, and classified staff. The following research questions were addressed:

What types of racial and ethnic issues and concerns exist among the university's faculty and staff? To what extent do members of the campus community perceive that their race and ethnicity related issues and concerns were successfully resolved?"

### Research Methodology

In this study, a critical incident survey was used to identify race and ethnicity related issues and problems among the faculty and staff of the university. The design of the survey utilized phenomenological inquiry by attempting to understand what relevant race and ethnicity related encounters employees at the university have experienced in the context of their employment. Reflections elicited through critical incidents represent a form of reflection-on-action, where one replays an experience in his/her mind to form opinions and judgments of past behavior. For seven weeks, a Personal Reflections on Race and Ethnicity On-Line Survey was made available to all faculty, academic staff, classified staff, and limited term employees (LTE's) at the university. Also, a hard copy of the survey was sent to all employees via the campus mail. Both forms posed seven questions that asked respondents to recount either a positive or negative race/ethnicity related experience as a university employee.

The survey asked potential respondents to, "Think back over the last five years of your history as an employee at the university with a specific racial/ethnic identity. Identify a race/ethnic related incident you remember as one that caused you the (for a negative incident) greatest discomfort, pressure, or difficulty." "What happened?" "When and where did it happen?" "Who was involved?" "What did you do about it?" "Did you tell anyone?" "If so, whom did you talk to?" "Was it resolved to your satisfaction?" "If not, what would you like to see happen?" "What is it about the event that was so significant?" Analysis of the surveys was accomplished with the aid of N-Vivo, a software program designed to help organize data. A total of 97 surveys were returned.

### Findings from the Personal Reflections Survey

#### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Of the different classifications of employees, Faculty represented the largest group of respondents, about 38 percent, followed by classified staff, 33 percent; and administrative staff, 19 percent. Only 9 percent of the respondents were academic staff. Most of the respondents (i.e., 54%) were between the ages of 41 and 60. The next highest represented group (i.e., 32%) was those between the ages of 25 to 40. European Americans (i.e., 52%) were the dominant racial group to respond to the survey. African Americans (i.e., 19%) were second, followed by Internationals (i.e., 16%), Latino/Hispanic (5%), American Indian (2%) and Asian American (5%). Most of the respondents (28%) have been employed at [the university] from one to two years; 22% were employed 3 to five years. However, about 13 percent were employed from six to ten years, and 17 percent were employed from 11 to 20 years; and 19 percent were employed over 20 years.

#### What Happened?

Ninety seven responses were provided to the question, "What happened?" They were organized into several themes: The largest number of respondents (i.e., 58 or 59.8%) indicated that they had experienced negative or problematic issues. A total of 20 (20.61%) indicated that they had

no race or ethnicity related incidents to report. Another nineteen individuals (19.6%) provided responses that “embraced diversity.”

#### No Race or Ethnicity Related Incidents to Report

A total of 20 individuals submitted responses that indicated they had no positive or negative race or ethnicity related incidents to report. Statements such as, “nothing comes to mind,” “never had this happen,” “I have not experienced such an incident at [the university],” “nothing has happened to cause me great discomfort....there have been subtle things but nothing comes to mind,” “nothing in particular,” “just the usual smiles and friendliness from the students and faculty,” “nothing I can recall,” “all of my days at [the university] are great,” “no event,” and others.

#### Positive Incidents: Embracing Diversity

Nineteen of the cases provided very positive assessments of their experiences at the university. They actively embraced the notion of diversity on campus and saw diversity as a strength. They commented on positive personal and working relationships with diverse colleagues, and positive and insightful interactions with students of color. They acknowledged programs that included diverse faculty and staff, and programs that were successful in recruiting and retaining students of color. Below are several cases which capture the variety of the observations reported by respondents who seem to have embraced diversity.

##### Case 1: Collaboration on Major Grant Led to Understanding of Cultural Identity

A European American Administrator learned from his/her collaborative relationship with an African American faculty employee.

With a colleague in another dept, we received a major grant from a private foundation that allowed us to develop and deliver a unique Master's degree program to a cohort of teachers in [a major K-12 urban school district]. I am a white Full Professor and my colleague is an African American Assistant Professor. The grant was for three years beginning in 1995. This was truly a special collaborative relationship. The relationship was mutually beneficial and, I believe, we both learned a lot from each other. In our work relationship, we constantly had wonderful discussions about my ‘white privilege.’ What was truly amazing was candidness, honesty and integrity of the relationship.

##### Case 2: Senior AA Faculty Mentors European American Academic Staff

A European American academic staff reported the following experience.

A senior level African American faculty member took time out of his schedule over many years to mentor me on many occasions about politics, responsibility, public policy engagement, issues of power and how it plays out in society and at the University, and other matters. ....I listened, I asked questions, I was given feedback, and I learned a great deal. He was my teacher. ....I never expected that such a senior level faculty member would take the time to help educate and mentor a staff member.

#### Negative or problematic issues Reported

Fifty eight of the incidents reported negative or problematic issues. These included incidents involving racial discrimination; derogatory and/or insensitive race/ethnicity related comments; reverse discrimination and/or favoritism; claims of a race/ethnic minority "playing the race card;" the lack of significant diversity on campus; and reports of "rude behavior" where individuals perceived that they were treated rudely because of their race/ethnicity.

**Racial Discrimination.** A total of 17 cases were submitted by individuals who experienced the behavior personally, witnessed the behavior, received a verbal or written report from an aggrieved individual (or witness), or was accused by an ethnic minority of discriminatory behavior. These incidents included accusations of the creation of a hostile work environment because of one's racial background; occupational discrimination; racial profiling, hiring discrimination, differential reporting assignments, racist symbols, and others. Below are several examples of cases indicating racial discrimination.

#### Case 1: Excellent AA Staff Employee Forced Out of Position by Assistant Dean

A European American Administrator reported an incident in which an African-American staff employee was essentially forced out of her position.

In addition to her [staff] responsibilities, she also developed and implemented an award-winning mentoring program for our students of color. She was given few resources and very little support for this time-consuming and important activity; she was expected to run the program on 'her own time.' She did this for a number of years. Then the climate turned very chilly for her, and she ended up leaving the School to take a position at another area on campus. ...We now have a situation in which ALL of our [staff] are white, and no one seems to care (except, of course, our few and precious students of color).

#### Case 2: Professor is Flip, Arrogant, Intimidating, and Demeaning to AA Students

A European American faculty member reported a case in which a professor, in a class of approximately 200 students, treated black students poorly and unfairly as compared to white students.

A professor would answer questions asked by black students in a very flip, arrogant, intimidating way, demeaning the person asking the question. When a black student asked a question, the professor would say 'What... what... I can't hear you...' 3 or 4 times in a nasty way. When a white student asked a question, he approached it very differently, i.e., with respect and candor. He never said 'What...' even when the white student was in the same row as the black student (i.e. same distance from the professor)! He also referred to black students as black. 'Was that that black student that wanted to take the exam late?' 'Why is it that blacks are always late to exams?' 'Was that a black student that called?' etc. ...It was clearly discrimination.

**Race Card.** Playing the race card is a strategy typically employed by race/ethnic individuals (and groups) to leverage arguments, debates, and resources in confrontational situations. Several cases were reported in this investigation in which the respondents seem to have perceived that a colleague played the race card.

#### Case 3: New AA Hire Put a Black Spin on Her Experiences in Department

A European American classified staff employee reported negative experiences with a new AA academic staff employee.

An African-American woman was hired as an Academic Staff in our department. I wasn't introduced to her until two days later at a meeting. Apparently during those first two days on the job, she just observed and walked around and got a 'feeling' for the place. What she related during that meeting two days later overwhelmed me. She described, from her perspective, what her impressions were about our department; all negative, all inflammatory, all aimed directly at us at the meeting, and other management personnel. She continued in this vein during her period of employment with us. It wasn't like she was just looking for situations to bring to our attention; she purposely, actively, put a black spin on everything she said. Everything was exaggerated and put into racial tones. ....My supervisor was reluctant to take any direct action. She was actually scared.

Rude Behavior. Below is an example of a case of rude behavior.

#### Case 4: European American Faculty Tossed a Sharpened Pencil to AA Student

A European American shared the following incident.

An adult minority (black) student walked by my office door and then stopped in the doorway. I was sitting behind my desk working. The female student asked if I had a pencil that she could borrow. I said sure. I reached into one of my coffee mugs, selected a pencil, sharpened it and then casually tossed it to her. The adult student made no attempt to catch the pencil and it fell to the floor. What I'm not absolutely sure about today is whether or not I tossed it far enough for her to catch. The adult then became upset that I had tossed the pencil at her. She made a negative comment and then left in an obviously agitated state. I left the incident thinking that person had felt that I had treated her rudely (because of her race) by tossing the pencil to her and perhaps tossing it poorly. ....After she left I was disappointed that she had taken my act of kindness or help in a negative light and that she took offense at how I had tried to help her."

Reverse Discrimination. Reverse discrimination involves a situation in which European Americans are perceived to be placed at a disadvantage because of their race. Several cases were reported in the survey.

#### Case 5: AA Supervisor Perceives White Male as Subverting/Challenging Authority

A European American Indian classified staff employee reported the following incident.

I came to work for a program at [the university] whose mission relates to cultural diversity. I was hired, despite the apparent misgivings of the person who was to be my boss. I am a white hetero male; she is a black non-hetero female. It became increasingly clear during the months to come that she was unable or unwilling to believe that I accepted her authority, and was not chafing under it in any way. I respected her (still do) for what she has accomplished and for the work she does. She nonetheless became convinced that I was subverting and challenging her authority as my supervisor; and it became increasingly clear that there was NOTHING I could do or say that would allow her to accept that I respected her. [I] left, sorrowfully, with feelings of distress and bitterness. ....I quit that job, at great financial damage to myself, rather than continue in the soul-destroying situation that had developed. There were no bad people involved in this; the supervisor is a fine person as a human being, just unable to accept me without judgment. ...I was convicted without trial, never given a chance.

What Did You Do About It?

Regarding the question, "What did you do about it?" several themes were observed from the 62 responses provided. The majority of respondents took a proactive stance by reporting the incident to a "Supervisor or Administrator" (25.8%) or taking some form of corrective action, e.g., discussing the issue with the "Person" (14.5%), taking "Personal Action" (12.9%), making them "Accountable" (4.8%), or discussing the issue with "Other People" (3.2%). However, many of them (17.8 %) "Felt Helpless or Powerless" (i.e., they felt that they could do nothing about it), and some (11.3%) chose to "ignore" the incident, i.e., they did "Nothing." Of the 47 responses to the question "Was it resolved to your satisfaction?" 63 percent indicated that the incident was not resolved to their satisfaction; while 37.2 percent indicated a positive resolution.

### Conclusion

Three themes captured the types of race and ethnic diversity-related experiences encountered by employees. For some employees, diversity is a non-event. They have experienced the urban campus without encountering meaningful race/ethnicity incidents. Some employees have encountered positive experiences which suggest they embrace diversity and view it as a means to enhance their experiences as employees. The majority of respondents in this study experienced wide variety of race and ethnicity related issues and problems that negatively affected their experiences as employees. These were intense, frustrating, and highly emotional encounters with (or among) colleagues or students. Many of these incidents were reported to a supervisor/administrator, and a majority of the cases were not resolved to the satisfaction of the reporting individual. The university should address these issues via more appropriate training for administrators and other interventions targeting all employees.

References will be provided upon request.

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Larry G. Martin, Ph.D., Department of Administrative Leadership, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. E-Mail: [lmartin@uwm.edu](mailto:lmartin@uwm.edu)

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